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Application Serial No. 09/903,257
Attorney Docket No. 002566-024 (009000)
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AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions and listings of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (Previously Presented)   An apparatus connecting buyers and sellers of products and services comprising:

a comprehensive directory of companies;

a user-maintained database of registered and subscribing companies selected from said comprehensive directory; and,

service-brokering tools for interacting with said directory of companies and user-maintained database of companies, wherein said service-brokering tools comprise:

registering means for buyers and sellers to subscribe to the user-maintained database;

contacting means for buyers and sellers to contact subscribing members of the user-maintained database over a network;

searching means for said buyers and sellers to search said directory and said user-maintained database based on geographical boundaries,

assigning means denoting a weighted importance to provider characteristics associated with each subscribing buyer and seller using object affiliations to indicate a level of presence each object is given in the directory, wherein the level of presence is based upon company profile, search result positioning and access to Requests for Proposals to afford each subscribing buyer and seller to be listed in multiple brands;

ordering means for ranking buyers and sellers according to said weighted importance of provider characteristics stored in the user-maintained database;

branding means for defining visual attributes, geometric layouts, graphical layouts, textual layouts, interface elements, and logical design elements that can be used to dynamically generate a branded Web site to afford each subscribing buyer and seller a different appearance across directories; and

an internal mechanism for a Web server to infer a private label interface from an initial network request of a registered and subscribing company that can persist and cache said private label interface information for the Web server by loading

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taxonomies specific to individual user-maintained databases and specifying the location of a request for proposal by publishing a pending Partner record to an active record and informing servers within a qualified farm of load-balanced Web servers to re-load said active record in response to a posting of a new request in a qualified server's category.

2-3. (Canceled)

4. (Previously Presented)   The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said service-brokering tools further comprise objects that can be used to generate private label interface-specific HTML wherein the object specifies the location of a request for proposal.

5. (Canceled)

6. (Previously Presented)   The apparatus of claim 4, wherein said service-brokering tools further comprise a mechanism to synchronize partner information across said farm of load-balanced Web servers based upon the topology of the qualified farm, wherein the synchronized partner information comprises updated files incorporating the latest information independent of the server that supplies the information.

7. (Previously Presented)   An apparatus for connecting buyers and sellers of products and services comprising:

    means for collecting, storing, and sharing requests for proposals, wherein said means for sharing requests for proposals allows said buyers and sellers to supply, access, and respond to said requests for proposals by distributing said requests for proposals to predefined subscribers based upon a hierarchical set of categories selected and assigned to said requests for proposals when said requests for proposals are created;

    means for geographic radius searching, wherein said means for geographic radius searching allows said buyers and sellers to search said requests for proposals within specified geographic boundaries and to share requests for proposals with one another; and

    means for partner web site branding, wherein said means for partner web site branding allows said buyers and sellers to encapsulate web site branding information to form

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a community to facilitate the sharing of said requests for proposals and to publish modifications made to said requests for proposal.

8. (Previously Presented)   The apparatus of claim 7 wherein said means for sharing requests for proposals comprises:

a data sharing engine for collecting, storing and controlling access to said requests for proposals of said sellers;

means for a subscription sales process for authorizing access of said sellers to said data sharing engine;

a request brokering engine for allowing said buyers to express detailed requests to the sellers who have been authorized by said means for subscription sales process and subsequently receive responses to said detailed requests;

an object catalog manager for maintaining statistical information collected from said data sharing engine and said request brokering engine; and

means for a catalog synchronization process for updating and synchronizing the statistical information maintained by said object catalog manager across a qualified farm of load balanced servers incorporating the latest statistical information independent of the server that supplies the information.

9. (Previously Presented)   The apparatus of claim 7 wherein said means for geographic radius searching comprises:

a GeoCode table containing data relating latitude and longitude information to geographic locations;

a Grouped GeoCode table containing an aggregated form of the data from said GeoCode table where records contain unique longitude and latitude coordinates; and

means for searching comprising a database compiled from normalized data from said GeoCode table and said GroupedGeoCode table.

10. (Original) The apparatus of claim 7 wherein said means for partner web site branding comprises:

a partner management tool for allowing a partner to edit a private label interface web site;

a brand distribution service for publishing modifications made by said partner

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management tool; and

a partner branding framework for generating web pages according to branding information from said brand distribution service.

11. (Previously Presented)   The apparatus of claim 10 wherein said partner branding framework comprises:

a web server with software having encapsulating technologies;

programming objects for controlling the encapsulation of branding information by said software; and

a template used as a foundation for web pages of said web server.

12. (Previously Presented)   A method for connecting buyers and sellers of products and services comprising the steps of:

collecting, storing, and sharing requests for proposals among a subscriber community by distributing said requests for proposals by a computer network of servers and clients to predefined subscribers based upon a hierarchical set of categories selected and assigned to said requests for proposals when said requests for proposals are created;

geographic radius searching an aggregate table of records stored within the computer network and containing unique longitude and latitude coordinates to enable subscribers to share requests for proposals with one another; and

dynamically branding partner web site information encapsulating said branding information into a web server template for display of the requests for proposals on a subscriber computer within the computer network.

13. (Previously Presented)   The method of claim 12 wherein sharing requests for proposals among a subscriber community comprises the steps of:

using a data sharing engine to collect, store and control access to the requests for proposals of said sellers;

using a subscription sales process for authorizing access of said sellers to said data sharing engine;

using a request brokering engine to allow said buyers to express detailed requests to the sellers who have been authorized by said subscription sales process and subsequently

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receive responses to said detailed requests;

using an object catalog manager to maintain statistical information collected from said data sharing engine and said request brokering engine; and

performing a catalog synchronization process for updating and synchronizing the statistical information maintained by said object catalog manager.

14. (Original) The method of claim 13 wherein said subscription sales process comprises:

navigating to a private labeled interface;

clicking a registration hyperlink;

selecting a subscription package;

building a profile of a company;

categorizing the profile by selecting main categories and sub-categories from a local taxonomy of the private labeled interface; and

creating an affiliation between the company and the private labeled interface.

15. (Original) The method of claim 12 wherein said geographic radius searching comprises the steps of:

relating latitude and longitude information to geographic locations;

aggregating information relating latitude and longitude to geographic locations in order to generate unique latitude and longitude coordinates;

normalizing said aggregated information;

importing said normalized information into a database; and

searching said database.

16. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 12 wherein dynamically branding partner web site information comprises the steps of:

editing a private label interface web site using a partner management tool;

publishing modifications to the buyers and sellers using a brand distribution service; and

generating co-branded web pages according to branding information from said brand distribution service.

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17. (Previously Presented)   A computer-implemented method for connecting buyers and sellers of products and services comprising:

maintaining a comprehensive on-line directory of sellers;

providing a request for proposal application to a seller for integration into a Web site of a buyer partner;

co-branding said request for proposal application with buyer and seller information;

maintaining a searchable directory of sellers for said buyer partner;

providing an e-commerce infrastructure in which to exchange the request for proposal · application and response to the request for proposal;

marketing a private-labeled web site of said buyer partner; and

providing usage and revenue reports that detail usage on the private-labeled web site of the buyer partner.

18. (Currently Amended)   A computer-implemented method for providing an on-line directory of ~~vendors~~ sellers by which buyers contact the ~~vendors~~ sellers with requests for proposal information through the creation of a web community with partner web sites, the method comprising:

maintaining a comprehensive on-line directory of sellers;

providing a request for proposal application for integration into a Web site of a partner;

co-branding said request for proposal application;

maintaining a searchable directory of companies for said partner;

providing an e-commerce infrastructure;

marketing a private-labeled web site of said partner; and

providing usage and revenue reports that detail usage on the private-labeled web site.

19. (Previously Presented)   A system for providing an on-line directory of providers by which buyers contact the providers with requests for proposals through the creation of a web community with partner web sites, the system comprising:

a data sharing engine to collect, store, and control access to the requests for proposals;

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a subscription sales processor to provide subscribers a termed presence in the system;

a request brokering engine to communicate requests for proposals between buyers and providers, wherein the request brokering engine includes:

including a request notification mechanism

including a request aging process mechanism

an object catalog manager, and

a catalog synchronization processor; and

a geographic radius searching engine for buyers and providers to find each other based upon geographic locations and distances.

20. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 19, wherein the data sharing engine includes:

a database that stores data from partner web sites;

a private label interface to collect requests for proposals from buyers and to publish requests for proposals to providers; and

a partner parent site to link a user to the private label interface.

21. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 19, wherein the subscription sales processor provides a termed presence including:

a company profile;

a search result positioning mechanism to position a provider's entry before other entries in a displayed search results list; and

access to the requests for proposals.

22. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 19, wherein the request notification mechanism generates targeted communication to providers when a new request for proposal is posted.

23. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 19, wherein the request aging process mechanism communicates with buyers when a

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buyer's request for proposal is about to expire and when out-of-date requests for proposals are not acted upon by buyers.

24. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 22, wherein the targeted communication to providers when a new request for proposal is posted includes means for accessing the newly posted request for proposal.

25. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 24, wherein the request notification mechanism further generates a communiqué to buyers when a provider submits a response to the buyer's request for proposal.

26. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 19, wherein the object catalog manager maintains information regarding the web community related to buyers and providers and the requests for proposals.

27. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 19, wherein the catalog synchronization processor deploys the partner web sites across a load-balanced farm of web servers and synchronizes memory caches on each of the web servers.

28. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 19, wherein the geographic radius searching engine includes a GeoCode table relating longitude and latitude coordinates to geographic locations and further includes a Grouped GeoCode table where records contain unique longitude and latitude coordinates, and wherein the system provides an ordered display of the on-line directory of vendors according to the GeoCode table and the Grouped GeoCode table.

29. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 28, wherein the ordered display of the on-line directory of providers is reordered based upon subscription levels of the providers.

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30. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 19, further comprising a site branding system to co-brand the request for proposal.

31. (Previously Presented)   The system for providing an on-line directory of providers of claim 30, wherein the site branding system includes:

a partner management tool to edit a partner's private label interface that collects requests for proposals from buyers and publishes requests for proposals to providers;

a brand distribution service to publish modifications to the system when a partner's private label interface is edited; and

a partner branding framework to construct branding attribute objects to format and convert a partner's private label interface information into an authoring language with which to present the partner's private label interface.

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